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« *The English Persius* »:
John Marston and Elizabethan Formal Satire

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« *The English Persius* »: John Marston
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di Gabriella La Regina

If John Marston, as Axelrad has said, is « un excellent miroir de l'âme de son temps »¹, he is certainly also an excellent, though somewhat distorting and exaggerating, mirror of certain current literary practices, and more specifically, of the vigorous movement for literary innovation and change animating a small group of poets eager to experiment with new forms and to be known as originators and pioneers.

Marston, Joseph Hall, John Donne and their friends² all belonged to a small *coterie* of wits associated with the Universities and the Inns of Court, and shared the same ideas about the nature and function of the « new » poetry they wished to write. Boldly experimenting with a new genre, deliberately striving for originality at all costs in the attempt to establish quickly a literary reputation for themselves, these young men affected utter contempt for the literature and society of the time, striking an attitude of defiance and protest. Their experimental work, consciously fashioned after the classical models and devoted to exposing the vices and follies of the age, was primarily addressed to a small, selected audience of their peers, who alone could appreciate their effort to create a new poetic medium, their learned allusions, their clever imitation and adaptation of the Latin models.

In the satires of Juvenal — in their eyes, the « Prince of Satyrists » — Martial and, to a lesser degree, Persius, these cultivated and arrogant *poetae novi* found exactly what they needed. The « angry young men » of the 1590's saw in the contemporary situation a parallel with Roman society and its underworld as

described in the *maledicum carmen* of outspoken attack, and wrote virulent satires which imitated Juvenal's tone of *saeva indignatio*, his directness and energy: their attempts to imitate also his consummate rhetorical skill, his subtle manipulation of language, and other aspects of his complex artistic personality were far less successful.

Essentially, then, Elizabethan formal satire was an outspoken, relentless attack on vice and folly effected through the means of a speaker, a *persona* which developed from the literal mask used in the satyr-play of antiquity into a literary device with a number of well-defined, conventional traits. According to George Puttenham, for instance, satire was « the first and most bitter invenitive against vice and vicious men... spoken by disguised persons under the shape of Satyres... those terrene and base gods »³. The violent tone of invective, the unrelieved pessimism, the focusing on individual knaves and fools — which is reflected in the use of personal type-names — and private evils, rather than broadly depicting the social scene or classes and attacking public evils as the early English satirists had done, are other aspects of the new satiric genre which derived chiefly from the imitation of the Roman satirists⁴.

John Marston's satires⁵ exemplify, for better or worse, all the most typical features of this genre in a combination which is, to a certain degree, unique and yet significantly representative. « Marston carried certain satiric tendencies to the extreme, he was very self-conscious about his art and frequently explained what he was doing and why »⁶: therefore, by examining his shortlived and pugnacious career as a satirical poet, we shall be able to reach a better understanding of the current of experiment in Elizabethan poetry as exemplified by the satirists of the 1590's, as well as of the literary *querelle* caused by some aspects of their poetic practice.

In these terms, we can both understand Marston's notoriety as the « English Persius »⁷ and the ridicule he attracted from those men of letters who objected to the verbal intemperance, wilful obscurity, and metrical roughness, as well as to the sensationalism of the youthful Muse which roared, slashed, and scourged the « lewd age » with a mixture of self-righteous zeal and obvious zest, as the « snaphaunce Satyrist » forced his way to fame. Marston is mentioned by Francis Meres in his *Palladis Tamia* (1598), the

well-known report on the newest writers of the time, as one of the chief satirists of the decade, on account of his *Pigmalion*. And *Certaine Satires*, even though Marston's « scraps of poesie » provoked « Critickes rage », as the poet himself informs us (cf. SV, « To Detraction »). *The Scourge of Villanie* had also a strong and immediate impact on the public, and quickly went through three editions, finding several imitators. « For one moment, Marston's ferocity... struck exactly the resonant note »⁸, and the young satirist's popularity is confirmed by Anthony à Wood, who reports that Marston had won a reputation as « a Gentleman that wrote divers things of great Ingenuity », adding that he was « in great renown for his wit and ingenuity in sixteen hundred and six »⁹.

Marston entered the literary arena belligerently, adopting the role of the bitter, fearless « barking Satirist », the blunt denouncer of vice irresistibly impelled to vent his indignation regardless of whatever reception his « biting rimes » might have. The ironic dedication of *The Scourge* makes clear Marston's attitude of proud defiance towards his audience: « To his most esteemed, and best beloued Selfe, DAT DEDICATQUE ». John Peter, who sees Marston as strongly influenced by Martial on many accounts, suggests that this dedication to himself might perhaps derive from a misunderstanding of Martial's dedication of the sixth book of his epigrams to a namesake¹⁰. This might be true, but it does not alter the tone of scornful rejection of the traditional appeal to the goodwill of patrons and readers for a favourable reception of the work. Marston, far from soliciting applause, loudly proclaims his contempt both for his censurers and for those who approve:

If thys displease the world's wrong-iudging sight,
It glads my soule, and in some better spright
I'le write againe. But if that this doe please,
Hence, hence Satyrick Muse, take endlesse ease.

(CS, V, 179-182)

At the same time, though, Marston is also appealing to the small *coterie* of wits who alone can appreciate his « well-labor'd lines », the « diuiner wits, celestially soules » to whom « cheerfully my poeme runnes » (SV, in *lectores*, 81,84). Immediately after, however, he reasserts his independence from his audience in the close of « To those that seem iudiciall perusers »:

Hee that thinks worse of my rimes than my selfe, I scorne him, for he

cannot, he that thinks better, is a foole. So fauour mee *Good-Opinion*, as I am farre from being a *Suffenus*. If thou perusest me with an ynpartiall eye, reade on, if otherwise, knowe I neyther value thee, nor thy censure.

This passage is also particularly interesting as it reflects, linked with Marston's conventionally defiant attitude to the reading public, another characteristic feature of the young satirists, the affectation of writing deliberately « bad » verse, and of attaching no value whatsoever to their poetic productions. This exaggeration of the fashionable *sprezzatura* recommended by Castiglione in *The Courtier* is in flat contradiction, on the other hand, with the lofty expressions Marston at times uses in describing his « well labor'd lines ».

Stultorum sunt plena omnia, the motto prefixed to the « Satyra Nova », is for Marston as for all satirists a basic axiom, and appropriately defines his attitude not only to his readers, but also to contemporary authors, whose works are attacked either as meaningless and affected, or else as pretexts for licentious « titillations ». « Reactio » and « Satyra Nova » are in this connection especially interesting, since they combine, to a greater extent than other passages of the satires, criticism of current literature in general with vitriolic abuse of a particular author, in this case Joseph Hall, whom Marston considered his rival and personal enemy. The literary quarrel between the two poets, which has attracted considerable critical attention, cannot be discussed here¹¹: it will be sufficient to note that while savagely attacking Hall, the « stinking Scauenger » writing « from his dunghill », Marston partly defines his literary theories, and that some passages of « Reactio », such as lines 87-100, have been called the youthful author's « Ars Poetica », or, perhaps more accurately, his *Defence of Poesy* against Hall's « vile Detraction »¹².

Besides contemporary literature, the targets that chiefly attracted Marston's attention in the satires are private morals and fantastical fashions, common topics singled out for attack by his fellow practitioners. Marston, though indignantly denouncing social abuses such as enclosures, monopolies and abuses of guardianship, does not deal with them at great length, chiefly concentrating on hypocrisy, lechery, self-righteousness, and stupidity. Setting himself at his task of exposing vice and folly, he invokes « *Grim Reproofe* » and « *Ingenuous Melancholy* » as his Muse:

Blacke Cypresse crowne me whilst I vp do plow
The hidden entrailes of ranke villanie,
Tearing the vaile from damn'd Impietie.

(SV, *Proem in lib.* 1, 16-18)

The « raging Satirist » creates a fragmentary, distorted, sub-human world, where evil flourishes and hypocrisy, deceit and brutish stupidity triumph:

O sleight! all-canning sleight! all damning sleight!
The only gally-ladder vnto might.

(SV, V 68-69)

Faire age!
When tis a high, and hard thing t'haue repute
Of a compleat villanie, perfect, absolute,
And roguing vertue brings a man defame.

(SV, V 99-101)

It is a nightmare world that reminds one of the crowded canvases of Brùghel and Bosch, swarming with misshapen, monstrous and squirming semi-animal creatures, a debased humanity that has perversely forfeited the right to be considered human. In *The Scourge*, VII, for instance, what « W. Kinsayder », the speaker of the satires, sees swarming in the streets are no longer men: « ...for *Circe's* charme Hath turn'd them all to swine » (SV, VII, 4-5). The poet's critical point of view is harsh, violent, and misanthropic throughout, and the unmasking of « the worlds detested sinnes » (CS II, 158) is pursued with relentless violence, with no occasional glimpses of a purer way of life or descriptions of virtuous characters, such as Juvenal sometimes employed by way of contrast, to provide a sort of chiaroscuro. All the Satirist can see around him is a « vizarded-bifronted-Ianian rout » (CS I, 40), « base muddy scum », curs, « senceless trunks », maggots, rats, apes, foxes, goats, and scavengers. A motley procession of gulls and rogues, lechers and sanctimonious hypocrites is, sometimes effectively and always savagely, lashed into lurid life, for one contemptuous moment, by the vigorous scourge of the indefatigable Kinsayder (who had announced « I beare the scourge of iust Rhamnusia, Lashing the lewdness of Britania » (SV, *Proem, in lib.* i)) and then is quickly hurled back into the dung-pit again. The « sharp-fang'd Satirist » « cannot choose but bite » (SV, VIII, 50) into new victims, and

the reader is at first given the impression of a dazzling, endless variety, heightened by the abrupt transitions and the rapid succession of personal type-names that follow fast one upon the other, as for instance in *The Scourge*, I. Lascivious pagan deities¹³ jostle fencers, crafty lawyers, foolish lovers, braggart soldiers, Puritans, spendthrift sons and miserly old men, vapid gallants and « sur-phul'd », shameless women. The variety, however, is only apparent, since we soon realize that practically every one of these characters is exposed as guilty of the same vice. The « ranke Puritan » is, after a savage attack on his hypocrisy, exhorted not to make « religion / A bawde to lewdnes » (SV, IX, 117-118). Soldiers are assailed for boasting of military exploits while in reality like « lew'd living/Tubrio » (CS I, 89-122), they « Melt and consume in pleasures surquedry », or else for lack of valour: « Weake force, weake ayde that sprouts from luxurie ». (SV, VIII, 67). Gallants that have travelled abroad and affect foreign manners and « clothes Italianate » are accused of bringing back « beastly luxuries, / Some hell-devised lustfull villanies » (SV, IX, 95-96); and so on.

The constant focus of the satirist on the corrupt and monstrous sexual practices of the swinish « brutes sensuall », described in great detail with a unique insistence, creates after a while a sense of monotony, since instead of diversified, individual personifications of vices and follies, what we are presented with is simply a reduction of all evils to a single, universal, soul-polluting sin, lust:

Hath dusk'd the fairest splendour of our soule:
The bright glosse of our intellectuall
Is fouly soyl'd. The wanton wallowing
In fond delights, and amorous dallying,
Hath dusk'd the fairest splendour for our soule:
Nothing now left, but carkas, lothsome, foule.
(SV, VIII, 165-170)

The medium created by Marston to effect a « good filth-cleaving strong purgation » (SV IV, 83) of « Infeebling ryot, all vices confluence » (SV, VII, 120) is a diction of unparalleled violence fashioned to convey Kinsayder's anger and disgust at the corruption of a fallen world where even the sun is « glowing with lust » (SV, II, 23). He is, indeed, a poet « who snarled and growled, who trembled with exasperated indignation, who shrieked to make himself heard »¹⁴.

Extreme epithets, a commanding tone, a heavy sarcasm characterize the speaker of the satires, and Kinsayder's deafening voice thunders incessantly with hardly any modulation. In the constant effort to be vigorous, to shock and surprise, to « out-herod Herod », Marston exemplifies to an extreme degree the tendency common to the young satiric writers of his generation, whose stock-in-trade were vituperation and a general intemperance of language, and who felt that at all costs they must keep the reader awake « with kicks, jerks, pricks, stabs, and shocks of surprising notions, images and situations »¹⁵. But Marston tries too hard, and attacks the « fustie » world with an inordinately heavy verbal artillery in which vulgar and learned words are inextricably and incongruously mixed, and which creates an impression of noisy, uncontrolled, and at times almost hysterical fury. Rather than the desired energy, his choice of words, his cumulation of adjectives (often in a heavy, awkward compound form, as « big-buzzing-little-bodied Gnats », (SV, VI, 101)) and verbs, and his mutilated syntax often only achieve what has been called « an uncouth and monstrous style of phraseology »¹⁶.

His vocabulary is on the whole rather repetitive, and is characterized chiefly by a striking number of terms connected with sexual activities, parts of the body, filth, decay and disease; these are described again and again, making an extensive use of vulgarisms drawn from the language of the streets and taverns which goes beyond the outspoken, colloquial idiom of the *genus humile* prescribed for satire by Renaissance critics in accordance with the coarseness of the Latin models. From a linguistic point of view, what gives Marston's poetic idiom its distinctive flavour is not only the recurrence of vulgarisms, but also the abundance of pretentious inkhornisms, such as the frequent Latinate expressions either archaic or coined for the occasion.

Marston boldly, and often rashly, experiments with « plaine naked words stript from their shirts », « oylie tearmes » and the « great battering ram » of extravagantly inflated language¹⁷, handling them with blustering arrogance. The blending of low language and high-sounding terms for which the satirists found a precedent, though far more skilful, in Juvenal, is a standard feature of Marston's wildly luxuriant imagery. His metaphors, often strained and grotesque, have been felicitously described as « typically, the usual

mad mixture of high and low materials »¹⁸, but it must be recognized that they reveal a remarkable creativity on the poet's part, though nearly always marred by his indiscriminating taste and lack of control. Though we occasionally encounter a spirited passage or an effective image, Marston only seldom achieves the concentrated energy and dramatic vividness he so obviously seeks.

Besides his extensive use of metaphors, Marston employs, sometimes as ironic burlesque, several stock rhetorical devices also traditionally considered inappropriate for the low style, such as invocations, epic similes, apostrophes, mythological allusions, catalogue:

These are no men, but *Apparitions, Ignis fatui, Glowworms,*
Fictions, Meteors, Ratts of Nilus, Fantasies, Colosses,
Pictures, Shades, Resemblances.

(SV, VII, 13-16)

All these devices are often exploited to an excessive degree, such as for instance the great abundance of mythological allusions, and the self-conscious effort, on Marston's part, to be at all costs original and forceful, to impress with his learned references, while coming too close to undermining the conventional pose of negligence and spontaneity ostentatiously displayed by the enraged satyr-satirist, results most of the times in a coarse, turgid and frenzied diction.

If Marston adapts, sometimes effectively dramatizing his material, the free dialogue form and the tone of familiar conversation he has found in his Latin models, most of the times, however, he misses their ease and flexibility, their control of the variegated *nuances* of the verbal medium. Though A. Caputi confidently speaks of Marston's « considerable range of style »¹⁹, the rare shifts of mood and consequent « modulations » of the satirist's verbal style do not seem sufficient evidence to substantiate Caputi's claim for variety and subtle modulations of tone as characteristic of Marston's diction. Whatever attitude « Mr Kinsayder » may adopt for the time being — whether choosing to appear as the misanthropic, furiously indignant Scourger, or as the fashionable, aggressively censorious, witty poet scoffing at the « base ballad stuff » currently in print, or else, finally, as the disillusioned, earnest teacher-philosopher — it is precisely his inability to vary his poetic idiom in ac-

cordance with these roles that strikes the reader, who soon tires of Marston's « very terrible roaring muse »²⁰. We may apply to « Mr Kinsayder » what J. Sutherland has said of Oldham, that he gives one « the impression of being carried along on a horse that has bolted, and even at times encouraging the horse to bolt when its impetuosity shows signs of flagging »²¹. Uncontrolled fury is the constant feature of Marston's satires, and when the snarling poet is ridiculed in *The Second Return from Parnassus* as « Furor Poeticus », he is described as « a Ruffian in his stile » who « Cutts, thrusts, and foines at whomsoever he meets »²²; his performance is finally thus summed up:

Nothing can great Furor do,
But barke and howle,
And snarle and grin and carle and towze the world,
Like a great swine...²²

On the whole, this assessment of Marston's stylistic peculiarities and range seems more accurate, though admittedly malicious, than Caputi's generous appraisal.

As regards the obscurity deemed necessary for satire, Marston does not show a consistent attitude. In *Certain Satyres*, II, he attacks the « Sphinxian riddles » of « our moderne Satyres sharpest lines » (21-24), and in the prose passage prefixed to *The Scourge*, « To those that seem iudiciall perusers » he explicitly declares his disapproval of an excessive abstruseness:

Know I hate to affect too much obscuritie, & harshnes, because they profit no sence. To note vices, so that no man can vnderstand them is as fonde, as the French execution in picture.

(SV, To... Perusers, 1-4)

He then goes on to affirm that he wrote « the first Satyre in some places too obscure, in all places misliking me ». (II 9-11). What follows is an extremely sensible explanation of the reasons why the classical satirists seemed, to the Elizabethans « crabbed » and « Duskie » (11. 18-28). This passage, which Marston concludes by proclaiming that notwithstanding the « seemely decorum to be observed, and a peculiar kinde of speech for a Satyres lips », « yet let me have the substance rough, not shadow » (11. 28-32), has been praised as « a really keen bit of historical criticism »²³.

If, however, as Marston tells us, *The Scourge*, I is to be taken as an ironical experiment in employing the standard techniques prescribed to create the obscurity deemed an essential feature of Elizabethan formal satire, the experiment is certainly successful, since the satire, especially 11. 11-35, sorely tries the ingenuity and the patience of the reader. A perusal of Marston's satires in general however, shows that his practice is often inconsistent with his theory: his frequent suppression of transition, his shifting from one speaker to another without clearly designating the shift, and his use of obscure mythological allusions, archaisms and technical expressions borrowed from alchemy, casuistry and scholastic philosophy²⁴, all contribute to make Marston more difficult to read than Hall or any other of his contemporaries. Most critics agree that unfortunately Marston has not made good his promise, « I cannot, nay I will not delude your sight with mists » (*To... Perusers*, 11. 32-3): as Hallett Smith says, « his abruptness, his jerky use of allusion, his violence of pitch, sometimes leave the reader floundering »²⁵. Axelrad often stresses « l'obscurité et les difficultés » of Marston's satires²⁶. Though in keeping with the decorum of the satiric genre, Marston's lines are often enwrapped in a « Cymmerian darknes » far darker than the « Egipts black night » he condemned in his fellow satirists, and on the whole the following estimate seems fairly accurate: « Marston, in cultivating obscurity, is obscure not only to the unlearned; he is equally incomprehensible to those who understand his allusions but do not find that they lead anywhere »²⁷.

Marston's use of metrics enhances the other characteristics of his poetic idiom. He employed in his satires the decasyllabic couplet, a standard feature of formal satire, and displayed great freedom in his use of this verse-form, showing usually a preference for open couplets. It has been remarked by A. Caputi that « to achieve packed, tightly knotted lines capable of ranging from cacophonous snarling to thundering argument, Marston used even the most conventional elements of his verse in an unconventional way »²⁸. The « unconventionality » stressed by Caputi, however, rather than in any distinctive metric innovation, consists mostly in intensifying the prosodic roughness we find in Hall and other satirists of the time. Metrical roughness is deliberately cultivated in accordance with the harshness required for dealing with satiric subject-matter,

as the poet states e.g. answering Curus, « whose eares nere reioyce / But at the quauering of my Ladies voyce » and who stands for those who have censured Marston for writing « harsh lines »: « Runde limping lines fits this leud halting age » (SV, VI, 16-18). An analysis of Marston's metrical style reveals that he in his « rough hew'd rimes » employs the following devices to achieve the desired roughness, as F. Burke, in his detailed study has shown: « frequent substitutions for the basic foot of the meter; juxtaposition of strong stresses and multiplication of pauses within the line; lines with more syllables or less than the decasyllabic norm; and frequent run-on lines »²⁹. All these characteristics are especially evident in *The Scourge*, I. Like his contemporaries, then, Marston makes clear that his « rude Satyre » is intentionally harsh and unpleasant in the qualities of sound used, (such as, for example, the sound effects produced by difficult consonant clusters) and in the quantitative pattern of the verse: the authorities are the « rough and crabbed » Juvenal and Persius, and the young satirists claimed that their metrical irregularity was not « an accident of composition nor the result of incompetence... but rather... a deliberately contrived element of the writing »³⁰.

In the course of his rejection of traditional poetic forms, too sweet and musical to suit his stern purpose, Marston shared the distrust of rhyme shown by his colleagues, and in his metrical manifesto, « Ad Rithmum » (i.e. rhyme), he attacks « like-fac'd rime » after a mocking invitation:

Come prettie pleasing symphonie of words,
Yee wel-match'd twins (whose like-tun'd tongs affords
Such musically delight,) come willingly
And daunce Leuoltoes in my poesie.

(*Ad. Rit.* 1-4)

Then comes the contemptuous rejection:

...hence base ballad stuffe, my poetrie
Disclaimes you quite, for know my libertie
Scornes riming lawes...

(*Ad. Rit.* 25-27)

The attitude is the usual defiant one of independence: purely formal considerations will not be allowed to interfere with the free expression of what the poet has to say. It is precisely this element

of cultivated technical negligence that was the focal point of Ben Jonson's attack on Marston, whom he took to be the most extreme exponent of the attitudes towards style shared by the formal satirists, and it is Jonson's denunciation of their linguistic vices and affectation of careless craftsmanship that will now be briefly discussed.

Jonson is simultaneously a critic and a poet, consciously aiming at the accomplishment of an artistic ideal and at the formation of an individual mode of expression reflecting a consistent, coherent attitude³¹. In his acclimatization of the Roman satirists, in the choice of the topics of his satiric verse, and in his rejection of the ornate and nerveless middle style of the love poets still writing within the hackneyed Petrarchan tradition, as well as of the high style with its welter of mythological allusions, archaisms, and pretentious phraseology, he shared, in general, the literary objectives of the young satirists of the 1590's³². But Jonson rightly felt that the reaction of these poets was too extreme, and that the effort on their part to develop a new idiom in poetry resulted mainly in an irresponsible use of language leading to an obscure, pretentious, and meaningless verbal sensationalism. Jonson's chief concern in his program for reforming the poetry of his time, «stripping her out of those rotten and base rags wherewith the times have adulterated her form»³³ was to create an idiom free of affectations and mannerisms of any sort, «pure and neat», yet «such as men do use» (as he states in the often quoted prologue of *Every Man in His Humour*), modelled on the Horatian *sermo*, flexible and completely controlled. In his own practice, he was eminently successful in carrying out his program, and his «vital, judicious, and most practicable language» has always been singled out, as one of his main achievements.

It is not «curious», then, as Alden remarks³⁴, but rather understandable, that Jonson should not have written avowed formal satires in the manner of Hall or Marston, refusing to associate his poetry with the coarse, often raucous invectives of the contemporary practitioners of the genre, and should have avoided calling his non-dramatic poems «satires». The brilliant parody of Marston's laboured eccentricity of style that we find in *Poetaster*, in which Jonson so effectively heaps ridicule on Crispinus (unmistakably meant as a caricature of Marston), is thus not to be viewed merely as an episode in the well-known Stage-Quarrel, but rather as an

example of constructive literary criticism. As Arthur H. King points out in his exhaustive analysis of the language of the satirized characters in *Poetaster*, «in Crispinus' crude diction, Jonson condemns not only Marston, but also some expressions of the new satire»³⁵. Marston's diction fully justifies his selection as the typical representative of the kind of verbal intemperance and stylistic anarchy which characterized Elizabethan formal satire. The passage (*Poetaster*, V, iii, 275-92) in which Tibullus reads some verses by Crispinus, a pedant who writes crude verse in an extravagantly ranting vein, is a clever and most amusing parody of Marston's mixture of gutter language, stuttering style and ornate bombast, as well as of his prosodic peculiarities:

*Rampe up, my genius; be not retrograde:
But boldly nominate a spade, a spade.
What, shall thy lubricall and glibberie Muse
Liue, as shee were defunct, like punke in stewes?*³⁷

The climax of the attack is the scene (V, iii, 390-565) in which Crispinus is purged of «his terrible, windie wordes», such as «barmy froth», «magnificate», «snotteries», and «quaking custard»³⁸.

While the formal satirists', and especially Marston's, attitude was mainly purely destructive, expressing itself in extravagant flights of invective and coarse vituperation, Jonson always displayed a consistent ethical purpose in his «comicall satyres», here as elsewhere fashioning his poetry «*ad correctionem, non ad destructionem; ad aedificandum, non ad diruendum*», as he stated at the end of *Bartholomew Fair*. His lifelong campaign against the follies and abuses of the time always aimed at correcting fools and reforming knaves, not simply at ridiculing and scourging them after their well-deserved exposure, and *Poetaster* gives us a clear indication of his success in carrying out his program.

It has been rightly observed that the publicity given by Jonson to the atrocities of Marston's vocabulary later prevented other poets, as well as Marston himself in the plays written after 1600, from making similar mistakes: «Marston's style was an object lesson» of the excesses to be avoided³⁹. Jonson, the most judicious writer of his age, was best qualified to make this lesson effective, since he has been justly recognized as the only poet of the period who

saw how to align the energies of the vernacular with the best of what learned men knew, thus avoiding both the offensive vulgarity and the inflated pretentiousness that characterized the idiom of enraged Timons like Marston and his fellow-satirists.

It has already been pointed out that corrupt and monstrous sexual activities are the dominant theme of Marston's satires, and that he describes them with an astonishing wealth of sensational detail, as well as with an extreme outspokenness. The tone of rebuke, of irrepressible moral indignation is sustained throughout the performance of the scourger, who proclaims that he was « create to whip/Incarnate fiends » (SV, VI, 15-16) and that he aims at curing the evils he unmasks, « Infectious blood, yee goutie humours quake/Whilst my sharp razor doth incision make » (SV, VI, 117-118), though he often states, with characteristic Juvenalian pessimism, that no cure is really possible. There are, moreover, passages of earnest, direct moral exhortation and philosophical generalizations (see e.g. SV, IV, 99-166) which express, it has been observed, a Calvinistic rather than a Stoic position⁴⁰.

It is not difficult to understand, however, how Marston's continual focus on lustful practices and physical nastiness may have induced many critics to view this insistence as an unhealthy fixation, the sign of a divided personality at the same time disgusted and attracted by physical love, and of a twisted, unhappy and unbalanced « melancholic » temperament. Marston has been variously described, notably by Axelrad, L. Babb, H. Smith and others as the typical Elizabethan Malcontent, and M. Allen, for instance, describing the malcontent type influenced by Montaigne, says of some of the writers of Marston's age:

They were at odds with their environment; their philosophy was incoherent; therefore they were at odds with themselves. Marston's mixture of villany-scourging and ribaldry is but typical⁴¹.

Most of the critics who have dealt with Marston's work, especially in connection with his satires, have shared T. Spencer's view that « it is difficult to regard Marston as an artist, for we are too strongly tempted to discuss him as a man ». Succumbing himself to the temptation, admittedly a strong one, Spencer proceeds to affirm that Marston lacked a « deep seated equilibrium » and that:

...the secret of Marston's temperament is that he was an idealist ...when the facts hit him in the face the blow was severe, and in order to conceal how much he was hurt, he pretended that he had known them all along, that he enjoyed them... At the same time the coarseness (of his satires)... which he used partly in self-defence fascinated him; when he satirized lust, he became lustful too, and his disgust at what he saw around him was relieved when he added to it by describing as disgustingly as possible the objects that caused it⁴².

The most thoroughgoing interpretation of Marston's work in a psychological, or rather clinical light it so be found in S. Schoenbaum's « The Precarious Balance of John Marston »⁴³, where the critic states that « If Marston's work lacks intrinsic merit, it is nevertheless a fascinating document of the divided soul of a man »⁴⁴; what follows reminds one more of a case-history than of a critical evaluation of a writer.

Several critics, then, have sought to explain the inconsistencies of attitude and the peculiarities present in Marston's satires by identifying, in some cases completely, the snarling, railing « Kinsayer » with Marston himself. This line of approach has often led readers and scholars to question the sincerity of Marston's loud denunciation of vice, as well as of his general attitude to his material. It is difficult, as Axelrad, for instance, points out (and the observation is applicable to Marston's fellow satirists as well), to take with complete seriousness, as the unadulterated, utterly sincere expression of a deep-seated moral indignation, the violent invective of a twenty-two-year-old man showering abuse on the « lew'd age » and exhibiting an attitude of unrelieved pessimism. Those who have accused Marston of insincerity have mostly based their accusations on his first literary production, the crude, uninspired and monotonous *Metamorphosis of Pigmaliions Image*, and especially on his later denial of having written a serious erotic poem in the Ovidian vein.

At the time of its appearance, *Pigmalion* was unquestionably and not surprisingly taken at face value, as has been pointed out, for instance, by Alden, who adds: « ... in 1619 (*Pigmalion*) was reprinted by itself as a serious poem of passion »⁴⁵ and from the first it brought charges of immorality on its author's head. In « The Author in prayse of his *precedent Poem* » preceding *Certaine Satyres* and in *The Scourge* VI (11. 5-32) as well as in other passages

of the satires, Marston, however, asserts that *Pigmalion* was a deliberately bad poem, which under pretence of displaying « The Salaminian titulations/Which tickle vp our leud Priapians » (« The Authour », 5-6), of pandering to the lascivious taste of the readers, was in reality satirizing both the genre of the Ovidian poem so fashionable at the time and the prurient readers. Marston then proceeds to rail at the stupidity of those who have misunderstood his intentions:

Cvrio, know'st me? why thou bottle-ale,
Thou barmy froth! ...

...
Yet deem'st that in sad seriousness I write
Such nastie stuffe as is *Pigmalion*?
Such maggot-tainted lewd corruption?
Think'st thou, that I in melting poesie
Will pamper itching sensualities?

...
Hence thou misjudging Censor, know I wrot
Those idle rimes to note the odious spot
And blemish that deforms the lineaments
Of moderne Poesies habiliments.

(SV, VI, 1-8, 19-20, 23-26)

Pigmalion is, indeed, an extremely poor piece (though at the time of its publication it aroused considerable interest), and it has chiefly attracted the notice of several scholars for the light the poem, and Marston's expressed attitude towards it, may throw on the poet's personality. The question that has divided the critics is whether it should be read as an Ovidian amatory poem (as Allen, C.S. Lewis, Axelrad and Peter, and others do), thereby disbelieving Marston's protestations and accusing him of pornography and insincerity, or whether we should take Marston's word for interpreting the poem as being at least in intention a sophisticated, subtle parody of the Ovidian erotic poetry then in vogue. Of the critics who have found in the poem varying degrees of burlesque, such as D. Bush, A. Caputi and P.I. Finkelpearl, (who ably summarizes the critical quarrel)⁴⁶, A. Caputi is the most convinced of Marston's sincerity in the matter: to him, *Pigmalion* is unquestionably « from the beginning, satiric in intention », a poem « designed to disintegrate the amorists »⁴⁷ and he singles out among other features of the poem its « novelty, its often strained ingenuity, its fragile and complex irony » as typical

of the literary movement that dominated the intellectual circles of the age and at the same time, as obscuring Marston's real intentions. Finkelpearl takes a middle stance, seeing *Pigmalion* as a serious attempt in the Ovidian mode (though not intentionally pornographic) containing also satiric elements, which are, however, obscured by the inability on the poet's part, to control the form or even to describe clearly his purposes in his subsequent remarks⁴⁸. The poem, then, is a failure from whatever angle one may choose to view it, but on the whole one feels that the impression of hypocrisy caused by the inability of most of its readers and critics to detect any satiric intention in it has to be somewhat qualified. As usual with Marston, it is difficult to assess his intentions with absolute certainty, but it seems more acceptable to see the problem with this poem in terms of Marston's craftsmanship, as Finkelpearl does, than of his moral integrity.

We have seen, then, that through identifying Marston the man with the « sharp-fang'd Satyrst » of the poems, several critics have accounted in psychological terms for the most striking features of his satires — such as the unparalleled violence of the invective, the thoroughly pessimistic vision, the wealth of sensational details in concentrating his attack mainly on lust — as well as for the presence of conflicting attitudes which coexist without fusion, such as the savage, almost sadistic relish with which the satirist exposes his victims, and the earnestness of the stern, serious moral philosopher. Many of these critics, however, have either disregarded or not given sufficient importance to the use, on the poet's part of a *persona*, which is, as we have seen, an essential feature of the established conventions for formal satire, and while recognizing that Marston set out to write within a given tradition which prescribed certain traits derived from the ancient satyr, they have often shown the tendency to see in the exaggeration of these traits almost wholly the features of Marston himself. As A. Kernan has pointed out,

Instability, incoherence, wildness, uncertainty, contradiction are the very essentials of the satyr character, and are part, as Peter admits, of all the satirists of Elizabethan formal satire⁵⁰.

Kernan seems right, to me, in his stressing the large element of artifice and conventionality that goes into the creation of the speaker in the satires, and in seeing in « W. Kinsayder » an artistic con-

struction rather than a direct reflection of the author's psychic make-up⁵¹. On the other hand, however, his claim for a virtually complete dissociation between the *persona* and Marston is not wholly acceptable, especially since he bases most of his argument on the distinction made clear by Ben Jonson in *Every Man Out of His Humour* (which Kernan defines « practically a diagram of Elizabethan formal satire ») between the author's feelings of outrage and the character employed to do the scourging. But while in reading Jonson's « comically satyres » we feel that the distinction has been successfully achieved, it seems to me that the same cannot be said for Marston, and as Kernan himself admits in other passages of his book, Marston does go too far in his verbal intemperance, does concentrate on lust more than other traditionally lustful satyr-satirists and does exaggerate all the characteristics that make up the satyr persona.

Hardly any writer, however imitative and prone to the dictates of literary conventions (and Marston's originality, though expressing itself in a questionable form, has been often stressed) can avoid showing at least a glimpse, however elusive, of his own personality, precisely in the varying degrees of emphasis he places on those elements he draws from the established conventions of the literary form he chooses. But it seems to me that in Marston's case it is particularly difficult to ascertain just to what extent the mask of the Satirist-malcontent is « a cruder and more highly coloured version of Marston's own face », as A. Davenport affirms⁵².

Ultimately the problem, though doubtless fascinating, is bound to distract attention from what to me appears the main reason for an interest in examining Marston's satires, that is, as furnishing a most suitable focus for the study of Elizabethan formal satire as a new literary genre, which among other things was trying to break away from an exhausted stylistic tradition in poetry. Although this need for a new form, a new poetic idiom was shared by many writers of the age, with varying degrees of success, it is Marston, on the whole not too successful in achieving work of great merit, that typifies the current of experiment which characterizes the 1590's. And it is this experimental aspect of his works, rather than either his controversial sincerity of utterance or his true personality, that justifies his selection as a representative figure of Elizabethan formal satire.

Note

¹ A. J. Axelrad, *Un Malcontent Elizabéthain: John Marston* (Paris, 1955), p. 4.

² For the purpose of the present study Ben Jonson will not be considered as one of the group, though he was connected with the same literary milieu.

³ George Puttenham, *The Art of English Poesie*, in *English Literary Criticism: The Renaissance*, ed. O. B. Hardison (London, 1967), p. 162.

⁴ R. M. Alden, in his *The Rise of Formal Satire in England under the Classical Influence* (Philadelphia, 1899, repr. 1962), observes that two streams can be traced as meeting in the England of the late sixteenth century, combining to give rise to formal satire: the familiarity with the classics, which was now the centre of culture, and the observation of the efforts made in Italy (by Ariosto, Alamanni and others) to translate contemporary life and thought into classical forms (p. 43).

⁵ *The Metamorphosis of Pigmalion's Image. And Certain Satyres* (1598) and *The Scourge of Villanie* (1598; second edition, twice issued with the addition of « Satyra Nova », in 1599). The most recent edition is in *Poems of John Marston* ed. Arnold Davenport (Liverpool, 1961). All citations in the text refer to this edition: I indicate the title, whether *Certain Satyres* (CS) or *The Scourge of Villanie* (SV), followed by satire number (in Roman numerals) and line numbers.

⁶ Alvin Kernan, *The Cankered Muse. Satire of the English Renaissance* (New Haven, 1959), p. 82.

⁷ See, for instance, J. Bowles, who edited Marston's non-dramatic works in the eighteenth century (London, 1784).

⁸ Philip J. Finkelpearl, *John Marston of the Middle Temple* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), p. 116.

⁹ Anthony à Wood, *Athenae Oxonienses*, ed. Philip Bliss (London, 1813), I, 762, 764.

¹⁰ John Peter, *Complaint and Satire in Early English Literature* (Oxford, 1956), p. 167.

¹¹ For full details of this quarrel, see especially A. Davenport, « The Quarrel of the Satirists », *MLR*, XXXVII (1942), 123-130.

¹² Cfr. Arnold Stein, « The Second Satirist », *MLR*, XXXVIII (1943), 274, and Morse Allen, *The Satire of John Marston* (Columbus, Ohio, 1920), p. 13. Stein analyzed in detail Marston's indebtedness to Hall, already pointed out by Alden (*op. cit.*, p. 139) and others.

¹³ Alden in this connection remarks that Marston « has the curious habit of reviling the morals of these classical deities in a manner for which I know no parallel outside of medieval Christian literature; though it curiously suggests the passage in Juvenal's account of the Golden Age... » (p. 138). Axelrad suggests (p. 43) that Marston does not dare attack the great directly, but « par divinité interposée », and some passages in the satires such as CS, V, 145-148, and SV, VIII, 151-154, seem to justify his hypothesis.

¹⁴ Anthony Caputi, *John Marston, Satirist* (Ithaca, 1961), p. 1.

¹⁵ G. B. Harrison, *Elizabethan Plays and Players* (London, 1940), p. 214.

¹⁶ A. H. Bullen, ed. *The Works of John Marston* (Boston, 1887), I, XVIII.

¹⁷ Cf. the malicious parody of Marston's style in *The Three Parnassus Plays*, ed. J. B. Leishman (London, 1949), I, ii, 267-284. In the same play, « Monsier Kinsayder » is also attacked for his indelicacy.

- ¹⁸ Kernan, p. 104.
¹⁹ Caputi, p. 42.
²⁰ Leishman, III, iv, 132.
²¹ James Sutherland, *English Satire* (Cambridge, 1962), p. 47.
²² Leishman, V, iv, 193-95.
²³ Alden, p. 108.
²⁴ Cf. Caputi, p. 45.
²⁵ Hallett Smith, *Elizabethan Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass., 1952), p. 246.
²⁶ Cf. Axelrad, pp. 38, 51, 53 and *passim*.
²⁷ Stein, 278.
²⁸ Caputi, p. 45.
²⁹ F. Burke, *Metrical Roughness in Marston's Formal Satire* (Washington, D.C., 1957), p. 5.
³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 2. See also p. 1 *passim*.
³¹ Cf. Ralph S. Walker, « Ben Jonson's Lyric Poetry », *The Criterion*, XIII (April, 1934), 436.
³² For an exhaustive analysis of Jonson's stylistic position as stated in the *Discoveries* and embodied in his non-dramatic poetry, see W. Trimpi, *Ben Jonson's Poems: A Study of the Plain Style* (Stanford, 1962).
³³ Ben Jonson, *Volpone*, « Dedication », in *Works*, eds. C. H. Herford and Percy Simpson 11 vols, (Oxford, 1925-1953, V, 21).
³⁴ Alden, p. 196.
³⁵ Jonson had already mocked some of Marston's most pretentious expressions in *Every Man Out of His Humour* (III, iv, 21-40) and elsewhere.
³⁶ Arthur H. King, *The Language of Satirized Characters in « Poetaster »*, Lund Studies in English X (Lund, 1941), p. 53.
³⁷ *Poetaster*, V, iii, 275-9, in *Works*, IV, 306.
³⁸ Though Jonson includes also some expressions from Marston's plays, most of the words vomited up by Crispinus come from the satires.
³⁹ Cf. Theodore Spencer, « John Marston », *The Criterion*, XIII (1933-1934), 584.
⁴⁰ For Marston's Calvinism, cf. e. g. Davenport ed., *Poems*, Introd. p. 220, and Finkelpearl *John Marston*, p. 110.
⁴¹ Allen, p. 120.
⁴² Spencer, 595; 597.
⁴³ S. Schoenbaum, « The Precarious Balance of John Marston », *PMLA*, 67 (1952), 1069-78.
⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 1070.
⁴⁵ Alden, p. 136.
⁴⁶ Philip J. Finkelpearl, « From Petrarch to Ovid: Metamorphoses in John Marston's Metamorphosis of Pigmaliions Image », *ELH*, 32 (1965), 333-348.
⁴⁷ Caputi, p. 21.
⁴⁸ Finkelpearl, « Metamorphoses », 334, 347.
⁴⁹ Cf. Peter, who states that Marston's early satiric work reveals « a personality in which « native instability... has been exaggerated to the point of incoherence » (*op. cit.*, p. 174).
⁵⁰ Kernan, p. 116.
⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 126.
⁵² Davenport, ed., *Poems*, Introd. p. 16.